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ABSTRACT

The issues of how to build, sustain, and evaluate a communication program are similar across a wide range of institutions. Each aspect of a program must interrogate culture, question power, and study the politics of the media. Issues which should be considered are the extent to which a communication program should be either: (1) theoretical/abstract or practical/concrete; (2) incremental/sequential or freefloating/unstructured; (3) critical/hegemonic or diffuse/open-ended; and (4) political economy or cultural studies. At the New School for Social Research in New York the Communication Department is a multi-faceted part of the university, the adult education division of the New School. Examining its comprehensive offerings (Master of Arts in Media Studies, Certificate in Film Production, the On-Line Program, Adult Education Course Offerings, and Special Events) demonstrates that the department needs: (1) to offer curricula, events, and programs which foster an understanding of the dynamics of human communication in the development and transformation of the culture in which they live, and in the cultures of others with whom they come into contact; (2) to provide an aid to analyzing the role of contemporary mass media through comprehension of the history, ethics, and political economy of the media industries; and (3) to train students in general (communication) and specific (vocational) skills which may lead to further education, to promotion and/or advancement within the media industries. In this way, the department can retain breadth, theory and practice orientation, and service the needs of a wide range of students. (PRA)

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EASTERN COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION -- 82nd Annual Meeting

Panel on Critical Applications in Mass Communication Pedagogy

Making the Product and Reading the Text: Politics, Culture and Media Studies

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I. Introduction: Issues of Pedagogy and Curriculum

Last year, I left The City College of the City University of New York to become chairperson of a newly-formed Department of Communication at the New School for Social Research. This makes the fifth time in my professional career I've moved to a new or revamping department in our field. Next year, I'll have spent two decades in communications programs, the majority of those twenty years with some administrative responsibilities in developing and running programs.

It's a wide-ranging array of institutions where I've spent my time -- from a conservative women's college, through a progressive residential liberal arts college, a traditionally-structured Catholic college, the "flagship campus" of the world's largest urban university, and, finally, to "the university for educated adults." Coupled with the even broader range of institutions with which I've worked as a consultant, my background prepared me for the pedagogical and curricular issues we face in constructing programs for the nineties and beyond (THE -- shudder -- MILLENNIUM, that is).

What has surprised me is that the issues of how to build, sustain, and evaluate a communication program are similar across the wide range of institutions with which I am familiar. Let's first take a look at an outline of some of those issues, and then I'll suggest how they play themselves out in my own current situation.

One last counsel: my individual evolution has led me to the understanding that a critical emphasis is essential in any

communication studies program. By "critical," I mean that each aspect of a program must interrogate culture, question power, and study the politics of the media. With the hope that my ruminations, tentative as they may be, will lead us to a more general discussion of the framework within which all this is contained, I identify four issues for our consideration.

It seems to me there are a series of "To what extent . . . either/or" statements which define the arena of which we speak:

·*To what extent should a communication program be either theoretical/abstract . . . or practical/concrete?*

There are several dimensions to this aspect, not the least of which is the demand on the part of many of our students for vocational skills. We can stress the need for theory as the basis for practice, and we can also design curricula which acknowledges the necessity of abstractions formed from concrete interactions. I have found that there is dissension among faculty members, and between the faculty and students, in discussing exactly how to blend these goals.

·*To what extent should a communication program be either incremental/sequential . . . or freefloating/unstructured?*

Given a desire to provide maximum curricular choice for the individual student, how do we determine what to require and what to leave optional? How much

should the student specialize; how much share a "core" curriculum with others who have different desired career paths? In my experience, those faculty who come from industry experience shun a rigid core ("too theoretical," they say -- which is not really accurate), and the academically-trained faculty opt for a common set of courses which build through increments. But even within a specialization -- journalism, for example -- there are debates about how much to sequence and how much structure to demand: Journalism I, II, III, *n* as skills sections, on the one hand; a more student-centered, journalistic studies set of options, on the other.

·To what extent should a communication program be either critical/hegemonic . . . or diffuse/open-ended?

There is an irony to asking this question at this time in this way. We risk entering into the absurd political correctness debate. If we can avoid it, we do have a real issue, which those of us who feel strongly that students deserve, indeed require, critical communication studies often discuss. How many critical communicators should comprise the faculty of a program? A third? Half? All or nearly all? Avoiding the false eclecticism of mainstream programs, and realizing the answer depends more on political realities than theories, we must deter-

mine how to remain open and yet offer the crucial critical counterweight to years and tons of bourgeois media propaganda.

·*To what extent should a communication program be either political economy . . . or cultural studies?*

. . . which brings us to the central issue implied in the title of this paper. The harshest, or at least loudest, debates within critical communication study are between the political economists and the cultural analysts, which includes postmodernists, post-structuralists, psychoanalytic Marxists . . . and a long list of others. In all the programs I've worked with, and at all the professional gatherings I've attended, this is the constant question among those who share the critical label. And I believe that the questions of signification, power, and production which arise from this arena have the fundamental concerns for the boundaries of all communications programs subsumed among them.

The answers to these "to what extents," of course, will vary from program to program. And, in any event, "either/or" formulations must yield in the critical universe to a dialectical understanding of the spectrum upon which we choose our place when we test our notions in actual circumstances.

It is useful as *praxis*, therefore, to examine in some detail the structure and concerns I contend with in my current program at the New School.

II. A Snapshot: How It's Been Done at The New School Till Now

The Communication Department is a unique, multi-faceted part of the New School, the adult education division of the New School for Social Research. For over sixty years, the New School has offered a wide variety of courses, taught by distinguished academics and professionals. The Communication Department offers a full spectrum of lectures, seminars, screenings, and cultural and educational programs to degree, certificate, and non-degree students of all ages. Courses are offered year round in three semesters: Fall - beginning late September; Spring - beginning early February; and Summer - in June and July.

Master of Arts in Media Studies: Founded at the New School in 1975, Graduate Media Studies is the academic discipline that explores why we communicate and the tools and processes we use to communicate. A media generalists's approach encourages students to blend communication theory and practice. Seminars are offered in media theory, history, criticism, and research. Production workshops provide an understanding of the potentials and limits of various technol-

ogies such as video, film, audio, print, photography, and computers. Course offerings have included: Research Methods in Media Studies; Demystifying Latino Film Images; Media and Propaganda; Science and Technology in Contemporary Culture; Video Criticism; Corporate Media Management; 16mm Film Production I & II; Video Editing.

Students may attend full or part time. Courses meet in the evening for the most part and students complete the program in two to three years.

Certificate in Film Production: The film production workshops are designed for individuals who wish to study the art of independent filmmaking. Courses cover the skills and techniques needed to complete the film projects students initiate at the New School's Film Production Center. Certificate participants complete two of their own film projects during their course of study. Successful completion of eight approved courses, including four mandatory workshops, is necessary to obtain certification. Course offerings have included: Developing Ideas for Film; Intensive 16mm Filmmaking I & II; Cinematography and Lighting; Independent 16mm Film Production; Directing Actors for Films.

Film Workshop students can submit completed films to the Annual Film Festival, where awards and scholarships are presented.

The On-Line Program: In conjunction with Connected Education, Inc., the New School offers students the option of

studying a variety of courses taken on-line through their personal computers. Students receive lectures and recitations, interact with faculty and other students, read assigned papers, and submit assignments via personal computer and modem. Students can "call up" classes any time, day or night, and can read and respond immediately or later from almost anywhere in the world. Many courses are available for graduate or undergraduate credit and as non-credit offerings.

Adult Education Course Offerings: The Communication Department offers over eighty different courses each semester in Communication Studies, Advertising and Public Relations, Journalism, Writing for Film and Television, Film Screenings, Criticism, Film and Video Workshops, and the Business of Film and Television. Most courses can be taken for either undergraduate credit or non-credit. And most of the courses can be incorporated into a course of study leading to a BA degree in Humanities and Social Science. We also offer a BA/MA option.

In recent semesters we have offered courses such as: Ethics in Mass Media; Writing Freelance Journalism; On Camera Presentation; Screenwriting I & II; European Films Noir; Cinema & Surrealism; New Directions in the Documentary; Film Producing.

Special Events: The Communication Department sponsors many Special Events throughout the year. Distinctive film screenings, seminars, lectures, and conferences on a broad range of cultural and media topics are presented. Recent

events include: **Bernardo Bertolucci, Jannette Dates, Donald Spoto's Hitchcock Retrospective, the NY EXPO of Short Films and Video, screenings with The American Federation of Arts, and the Annual Student Film Festival.**

III. A Redirection: How We Discuss Our Framework for Change

The following section is based on material I used originally in a Reorganization Plan presented to administrators. It serves to indicate, I think, how politics and culture should play themselves out in media studies.

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> I felt that since communication concerns itself to a great extent with internal consciousness, impressions, observations, and the like, rather than force my ideas into your mind on a scientific basis, I would simply ask you to compare my insights with your own. This is not to excuse this communication theory from the facts of life, but rather to admit that these insights must content themselves with resonance rather than certification.
>
> -- John A. Ciampa, *Communication: The Living End*

Communication studies is a field in ferment. For the newly-formed Communication Department, this has created both opportunities and pitfalls.

The recognition that our task is to create resonances of these contending forces in tune with the practical realities of our students offers our main opportunity. We are able, fortunately, to continue on a path charted in the concepts of the Media Studies M.A. Program.

Its former Director, Peter Haratonik, wrote in the most recent *Media Studies Catalogue* in 1989 as introduction:

> Reality is a mediated concept. Each day we employ our senses and our ability to think in perceiving, defining, and interpreting data. We then choose pertinent symbol systems, technology, communications media, to try and convey information, to communicate. Media studies is the academic discipline that analyzes why we communicate, how we communicate and the tools and processes we use in our communication efforts. Media studies is not undertaken in isolation. Rather, there is an interdisciplinary awareness of how ideas and systems are interrelated. Thus, a question always at the forefront of media studies is: How does communication impact upon our culture, business, politics, education -- and indeed, our personal and professional lives?

With Media Studies the cornerstone program of the eclectic offerings of the emergent Communication Department, we have the opportunity to reconceptualize the scope of our study. We can situate *media studies*, with its emphasis on technologies, firmly as one category of *communication studies*, of an analysis of interaction among people. Such interaction, of course, comes through their competencies in using languages to communicate, to share stories within cultural contexts.

More than a "mediated concept," *social* reality, in our communication-as-culture perspective, is a function of the way we structure our worlds with words and gestures and images. We can inform our programs in the Department with *both* the communication *and* communication*s* notions.

"Communication" refers to the primary process of social interaction through the sending and receiving of messages;

"communications" encompasses the secondary techniques (or means) of that primary process, those dependent on technological intervention and operation.

Such a reframing of the programmatic, media studies mission into the departmental, communication mission pushes the limits of our enterprise, and increases our abilities to respond to diverse questions with pluralistic insights. We study social formations and their cultures, realizing from our aforementioned distinction that *every* society communicates (for communication is the foundation of culture), and that *some* societies have more sophisticated communications than others (but not necessarily more humane, accurate, or efficient).

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> For a subject to *be* a subject in the curriculum, it has to have a structure of typifying concepts which may be borrowed from all over the place, indeed usually are, but are put to specific uses in the field.
>
> -- Fred Inglis, *Media Theory: An Introduction*

But while it is necessary and appropriate in the new configuration to expand the limit of our tradition in media studies, it is essential, as well, to delimit. This is the pitfall: if we try to think and to do too much, we cannot do any of what we wish to do well.

Many teachers and scholars working in the field suffer at times from professional anxieties, if not from an outright identity crisis. The reason is that communication as an emerging discipline borrows freely from established disci-

plines: anthropology, linguistics, psychology, and sociology in the social sciences; literature, speech, theater, and foreign languages in the humanities; biology, engineering, technology, and mathematics in the sciences. Communication draws freely from them all, as well as less traditional domains like journalism, film, broadcasting, and computer studies.

We can avoid the pitfall of superficiality by applying rigorous standards as we refine the courses and programs of the past. We wish to retain our breadth, our theory *and* practice orientation, our service to the needs of a wide range of students, and our energetic feistiness. To do so, we can orient our thinking to the attainment of these goals, our "typifying concepts":

- To offer curricula, events, and programs which foster an understanding of the dynamics of human communication in people's lives and in the development and transformation of the culture in which they live and the cultures of others with whom they come in contact.

- To provide in coursework and scholarship an aid to analyzing the role of contemporary mass media in the United States and the world, through comprehension of the history, ethics, and political economy of the media industries and appreciation of the role of alternatives to the dominant media in historical perspective.

• To train students in general (communicational) and specific (vocational) skills which may lead to further education, to promotion and/or advancement within the media industries, to the more sophisticated use of communication techniques in other career areas and in their communities, and to obtaining entry-level positions in a variety of circumstances in the New York area, nationally, and abroad.

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> ... I want to oppose the tendency inherent in the academic division of labour, to autonomize this field of study and thus both to exaggerate the special significance of the social phenomena under investigation (the study of the media *per se* tends to the trivial) and to cut the field off from the main stream of social science. The media are only worth studying in so far as they focus key problems within the general project of the social sciences.
> -- Nicholas Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*

The New School began the M.A. program in Media Studies in 1975, and, over the years, The New School has added an extensive array of communication courses to those initial offerings. Each semester, there are at least two dozen or more graduate courses, on campus and through the On-Line Program, and eighty or more other courses in communication studies, advertising and public relations, journalism, writing for film and television, screenwriting, film history and criticism, film and video workshops, and the business of film and television.

The New School offers such a comprehensive communication program that it has, in effect, a "School of Communication Studies." The establishment in 1990 of the Communication

Department in the Adult Division is a major step toward recognizing the importance of who we are, what we are doing, and what we can hope to become in the field.

With focussed exertion and with the skill (and luck) to avoid institutional trauma, we can navigate the pitfalls -- such as a deleterious diffuseness of offerings or fuzzy sense of mission -- and take advantage of the opportunities -- not only of our strong media studies tradition but also of our excellent national reputation and location in New York.

The intention we must have is to translate our goals, our "key problems," into the subject as we wish to define it. "[The] most audible and important characterizing feature of a subject," according to media theorist Fred Inglis,

> is its *idiom*, its habits of conversation and thought. How should it sound to talk about media theory [or communication]? What is its voice in the conversation of humankind?

The New School itself has an idiom, a progressive voice in humankind's conversation, of tremendous import, all its own. Its Communication Department, standing on the firm ground of the Media Studies Program that once was, is poised to raise its own harmonizing idiomatic voice in the years to come.

IV. Conclusion

As the field matures, the issues we must address in our pedagogy and curriculum design alter. But the essential questions remain, and they are the same questions asked in other disciplines of the-Western-social-sciences-in-crisis as critical scholars push for transformation.

The debate, once joined, continues without end -- it is, in fact, a process of dialogue which we have no choice but to engage. This should not, however, make us anxious or testy. On the contrary, such engagement allows us to meld the content and form of communication studies in a processual continuum.

Our quest to define critical applications in mass communication pedagogy leads us from communication theory, to media practices, from human interactional analysis, to message design, and back, and back again.